Networking with Visitors

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Imagine if you could instantly talk to interpreters around the world—share stories, exchange ideas, discuss experiences, and request solutions to problems. Imagine if you could easily talk to your visitors while they are planning their trip, throughout their stay, and even after they have gone home.

How would you like to find out what appeals to your visitors and what they think of new programs and exhibits before you implement them? Would you be interested in multiplying the number of personal contacts you make with just a few keystrokes?
All of this is possible, and other than your time, it doesn't cost a dime.

Many of our visitors and potential visitors are living in online communities and traveling through virtual spaces. These places exist in the realm of social media. Social media is a burgeoning new communication tool that allows people to interact online. The potential exists for social media to create new opportunities for interpretation.

Social Media and Interpretation
Interpretation is a communication technique that takes place in an informal setting and offers a way to connect people's minds and hearts to places. Yet interpretation is primarily a one-way process, with programs and exhibits designed by staff sitting behind closed doors. Social media creates an opportunity for interpreters and the public to engage in genuine conversation.

Until recently, I thought of social media as just a fancy form of text messaging and sharing photos—a place that my teenage nieces went to gossip with their friends. Then a colleague of mine returned from the 2008 NAI National Workshop and said, "Technology is huge. You should look into social networking." My friend is the lead interpreter at a National Park Service site and her advice is always excellent, so I looked.

In the process, I discovered a dizzying array of terms I didn't understand—like widgets and Web 2.0—so I bought the book Social Media is a Cocktail Party by Jim Tobin and Lisa Braziel. The premise of this book is that social media is nothing more than a conversation between people. To participate, you must behave as you would at a party—listen and respond with genuine enthusiasm, don't be pushy, and if you are going to share information or a story, it should be interesting and entertaining.

Social media is not a place for stuffy press releases, slick ads, or tedious education campaigns. Social media is a place for engaging with people in a personal way. This makes it a wonderful avenue for interpretation. Social media is an opportunity to make interpretation what it should be—a two-way conversation between interpreters and the public that allows us to share the delight of discovery.

This article is the first of a three-part series that introduces the tools of social media and offers thoughts on how they might benefit interpreters.

Social Media Tools
Social media is a suite of online technologies that provides users a podium from which to express their knowledge, experiences, and opinions. Have you ever read an online review of a product or movie? This is social media at work. You are gleaning information from another person's experience.

Social media allows you to attend people's online "parties" and listen to their conversations. One of the keys to successful interpretation is to know the attributes of your audience. By listening to what your target audiences have to say, you can learn to give them what they want.

A catch phrase that you may hear is "Web 2.0." In Social Media is a Cocktail Party, the authors explain Web 2.0 in this way: "Two-way communication has transformed the Web from a place to house brochures into a place to house conversations." In other words, the Internet has evolved from a static information source into an interactive environment.

The Web 2.0 world has the potential to change the way we run public comment periods, the way we design exhibits, and the way we meet the needs of visitors. A public comment period can become a dynamic discussion forum. Exhibits can be co-designed with a team of people representing different interests. The evolving needs of visitors can be met faster and more precisely.

As an example, a number of years ago, geocaching became a popular pastime for GPS users. Caches started to appear in parks and protected areas, sometimes causing damage to resources. Managers were slow to respond to this new field of recreation because it took them a while to realize what was happening. Eventually, rules and regulations concerning geocaching began to appear and some sites embraced the idea by planting their own caches. By monitoring social media sites, we can pick up on these trends more quickly.

Networking with Visitors
You may have heard of social networking sites like Facebook. People use these sites to build personal profiles and to keep in contact with friends. Sites like this also allow professionals working in similar fields to exchange information and ideas. NAI maintains pages on several of these sites, which you can find at www.interpnet.com

I encourage you to join one of these online communities and start interacting with interpreters around the world.

It's important to understand that a Facebook page is not a traditional Web page. Nor is it a press release or an ad. A Facebook page is actually more like a coffee house or a pub—a place where people congregate to meet friends, swap stories, share pictures, and exchange information. Your interpretive site can join in the discussion, but networking with visitors online only works if you show up on a regular basis and contribute something interesting to the conversation.

People can also build online communities around photos. Sites like Flickr allow people to organize, share, and even tag their photos with related information such as geographic coordinates. Photo sharing is another form of social networking and these sites can often be connected to sites like Facebook. For instance, Bright Kite is a photo-sharing site that describes itself as a "location-based social network."

Since photo sharing often revolves around a place, this is an excellent tool for connecting people with interpretive sites. Photos allow visitors to see a place before they embark on a trip or enable them to take a virtual vacation to a place they may never visit. Visitors can also discover new meaning in a landscape by viewing a place from another person's perspective.

A popular form of photo sharing is called a "map mash up." A mash up is created by mashing two different social media tools together to create something new. The most common mash up is a custom Google map. You can create map mash ups that attach photos, interpretive text, and visitor information to a map of your site. Check out an example from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum at www.ushmm.org/maps

Penelope Seal is the official spokes-seal for TOPP (Tagging of Pacific Predators), a project of the Census of Marine Life. Penelope has her own profile page on Facebook that she uses to keep her growing network of friends apprised of her activities.

The Five Fs of Social Networking
Fans
Social networking sites like Facebook allow members to join online fan clubs and follow the activities of an organization, museum, or interpretive site. Fans interact with an organization's profile page by posting messages, photos, and other content. These posts generate updates that let their friends know about new activity on the page. This feature creates a dynamic environment that is more interactive than a traditional Web page. Another way for fans to interact with a site is to become "friends" with an online presence, such as a historical figure, mascot, or animal.
Feeds
Internet users monitor feeds to keep track of new posts. A feed provides a snippet of information that allows users to decide if they want to read more about a topic. On social networking sites, a feed is generated when people make updates to a profile page. To ensure a regular stream of feeds, you will need to make the experience of interacting with your page rewarding for visitors. Think of ways to keep fans engaged—start discussion topics, run contests, or invite fans to comment on programs.
Fun
To get involved with social networking sites, you need to adopt a communication style that is conversational and fun. Each time you post new information online, simply ask yourself, "How would I tell this story to a friend?" Social networking is about people chatting with people, not agencies talking at people. Put away your technical writing manuals and pull out your personality—say what you need to say in a fun and engaging way.
Fascinating
A fun communication style is only part of the social networking equation. Your subject material must also be fascinating enough to capture people's attention. Think about whether or not the information you want to share is something you would tell someone at a party.

For instance, you might tell people about an interesting event that is coming up or wow them with a little-known fact. You probably wouldn't discuss routine maintenance or launch into a dissertation about an obscure topic—don't do it online either. Your fans will be more interested in visiting your page if you have something fascinating to say.

Frequent

The most important aspect of developing a thriving online fan group is frequent participation. Take a moment to think about how you maintain relationships in your personal life. Perhaps you meet friends for lunch or phone family on a regular basis. Your best friends are likely the ones you spend the most time with. Social networking works the same way. You must be committed to making frequent posts on your page and sending out regular updates to your fans. If you do this, your fans will reward you by spreading your message and rounding up new fans. This is the power of social networking.

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